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AUTHOR Tarnopolsky, Oleg
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ABSTRACT

A business English course taught to adults in Ukraine is described, focusing on the classroom approach that incorporates imaginative continuous simulations and critical analysis tasks. It is noted that simulations ordinarily in business English courses have two shortcomings: they are disconnected episodes; and the situation, conditions, and purpose are set by the teacher or developer of the instructional materials used, limiting the learner's creative share in the exercise. An imaginative continuous simulation represents uninterrupted modelling of business activities and communication, with the conditions and processes invented by the learners. Situations include a variety of business interview, negotiation, and discussion conditions ranging from getting to know the structure of a company to discussing sales results and targets. The simulation begins with one topic and continues throughout the course until all situations have been addressed. Each situation contains a number of critical analysis tasks concerning different aspects of the firm's business activities, including preparation for meetings, business strategy discussions, and decision-making. Students prepare much of their own material for the tasks, and create a group portfolio. The approach is found to motivate students and develop varied English skills. (Contains 5 references.) (MSE)

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BUSINESS ENGLISH TEACHING: IMAGINATIVE CONTINUOUS SIMULATIONS AND CRITICAL ANALYSIS TASKS

Oleg TARNOPOLSKY, Dnepropetrovsk State Technical University of Railway Transport, Ukraine

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BUSINESS ENGLISH TEACHING: IMAGINATIVE CONTINUOUS SIMULATIONS AND CRITICAL ANALYSIS TASKS

Oleg TARNOPOLSKY, Dnepropetrovsk State Technical University of Railway Transport, Ukraine

Imaginative continuous simulations and critical analysis tasks in Business English have been developed on the basis of experience gained in teaching an intensive English program. The program is aimed at teaching oral everyday and business communication in English to Russian and Ukrainian-speaking adolescent and adult students learning English as a foreign language in their own country - Ukraine. This program has been functioning quite successfully since 1993 in the city of Dnepropetrovsk.

The program itself is 7-month long with 12 hours of classes every week. It consists of 2 principal courses.

The first is a 14-week Survival or Everyday English course with 4-hour long classes 3 times a week. It is aimed at developing students' communicative skills necessary for oral interpersonal communication in everyday situations inevitable for a person on a short business visit to an English-speaking country.

The second is a 14-week long Business English course proper with 4-hour long classes held 3 times a week. It is aimed at developing learners' communicative skills necessary for participating in business talks on a broad range of issues. The course is based on content learning when teaching business communication is done through content matter in the area of business, management, marketing.

It is clear that simulations (Jones, 1982) should occupy the leading position among learning activities in the business course proper if the goal is teaching oral business communication with the primary aim of developing skills necessary for participating in different business talks. In fact, simulations do as a rule occupy a very prominent place in programs and courses of this sort - such as simulations of Executive Board's meetings or of annual shareholders' meetings, simulations of negotiations concerning purchasing some equipment, getting loans and so on and so forth. But simulations ordinarily used in oral courses of Business English usually have two shortcomings that make them much less efficient than they could be.

First, these simulations are most often disconnected episodes in the teaching/learning process. They stand apart, and are in no way connected either to one another by a common plot, participating personages etc. or to some real or imaginary life continuum. For instance, if in one class we have a simulation of business talks, it may have no meaningful relation to the following simulation of some other business talks in the next class. The idea was to connect all the simulations in the whole of oral business course by a single plot with the same characters of business people passing from simulation to simulation. All the other communicative learning activities within the course were to be integrated into this plot. For a business course, the plot itself would be most convenient to concentrate on organization and functioning of some

imaginary firm or company. If it is done in this way, all the teaching/learning process turns into one continuous simulation - some kind of an invented business activity environment where students live and act during their English classes. Creation of such an invented, imaginary, fictitious but life-size business activity reality where everything is based on communicating in English may serve as a sort of substitute for a professional English-speaking setting. It will in a way compensate for the total absence of such setting outside the classroom.

The second shortcoming of traditional simulations is the fact that as a rule in each of them the situation of business interaction and communication, conditions, purpose etc. are set either by the teacher or by the author of teaching materials. It puts a limit to the "share" of learners' own creative efforts in a simulation. This "share" would be much greater if the starting points, the circumstances, situations, conditions and purposes of business interaction and communication were invented (imagined) by students themselves - either individually or in group work. It would be especially helpful in continuous simulations described above. First, it would be easier for students to elaborate an on-going, developing plot than to invent something new each time. Second, in that case students in the classroom would not only live in invented business activity reality but this reality would be of their own invention and creation, in full accordance with their likes, inclinations, interests and needs. It strongly tasks learners' imagination and creative abilities but makes learning fully learner-centered (Nunan, 1988).

Now a definition of what is an imaginative continuous simulation in an oral Business English course may be formulated. It is such an organization of this course where all the teaching/learning process is developing as a practically uninterrupted modeling of business activities and communication - these activities and communication proceeding in the framework of almost life-like functioning of some imaginary firm or company. The conditions and process of functioning, purposes, everyday life and everything concerning this firm or company, as well as the firm or company itself, are invented (imagined) by students who in every continuous simulation are "actors", "directors" and "playwrights" - all at once.

What follows is a description of how imaginative continuous simulations are applied in practice - using as an example the oral business communication course already mentioned. This course presupposes teaching students to communicate in English in a number of business intercourse situations and on a number of topics. They include:

1. Business interviewing - getting to know the structure of a firm or company.
2. Business interviewing - getting information about management in a firm or company and hierarchy in its governing bodies.
3. Business interviewing - getting information about firm's or company's production processes and goods manufactured by it, touring a factory.
4. Business telephone communication.
5. Business negotiations - entering a business contact and stating purposes.
6. Business negotiations - getting and handling business information.
7. Business negotiations - coming to an agreement, making a deal, signing a contract, planning a joint project or venture.
8. Business discussion - discussing projects, budget and finances.

9. Business discussion - discussing business strategy, business results and competition.
10. Business discussion - discussing sales results and sales targets.

Imaginative continuous simulations start with the first of these topics and situations and go on to the end of the course. As soon as the structure and management hierarchy in a typical firm or company are analyzed and discussed, the teacher suggests to his or her students to organize their own firm or company deciding in what country this firm will function, what it will do, will it be a PLC or a partnership, what its structure and management hierarchy will be, who will occupy what position in that hierarchy etc. It was surprising to see how quickly and enthusiastically the students caught at the idea and entered the game. For instance, in 1996/1997 academic year the students of the group where this approach was tried decided that they will organize their firm in an imaginary small sea-shore East European post-Communist country called Bacardia where market economy had just started developing. They invented the geography of that country, minerals and raw materials it possessed, and decided that their firm would exploit mineral water resources in the country and organize tourist business in it.

After deciding in the process of discussion what the structure of the company should be, they organized elections electing people to the Executive Board, making nominations to different managerial positions etc. It was done in the process of students' discussing one another's personal and professional qualities, suitability for a certain job. They founded their conclusions not only on personal observations but also on the data taken from some filled in questionnaires. The questionnaires were suggested by the teacher and based on Gardner's multiple intelligence theory (Gardner, 1993). When the firm was thus "organized", its day to day functioning started. From now on every student acted in class only in his or her new "official role" of a Senior Vice-President, a Vice-President for Finance and Administration, a Personnel Manager or any other.

First, a lot of things had to be suggested by the teacher (what and how to discuss, in what situations etc.), but when the students, so to say, got the knack of it, all the initiatives became fully theirs. The teacher only set the general direction of talks and discussions when introducing new topics and materials, explaining, analyzing and training them.

It is quite natural that in the process of continuous simulations every student had to play not only the stable permanent role of some official in the firm they had created but also many other "temporary" roles. For instance, when negotiations on getting loans for the new firm were held, the student who was the Vice-President for Finance and Administration remained in the same position while some other students played the temporary roles of bank managers with whom this Vice-President negotiated the issue of loans.

But more than half activities in the process of continuous simulations the students organized as meetings (Board meetings, departmental meetings etc.). There different aspects of firm's business activities were discussed, reports of people responsible for definite aspects were listened to and discussed, and certain decisions were taken. It is

in these meetings that critical analysis tasks were born. Such a task can best be described by an example. Suppose the meeting is devoted to developing the students' firm business strategy for the near future. In getting ready for the meeting every participant is requested to prepare her or his set of suggestions as to business strategy - taking into account her or his responsibilities in the firm. The set of suggestions and their substantiation presented by every participant are to be discussed and criticized by other participants, i.e. critically analyzed. The purpose is finding weak and strong points and developing the firm's business strategy taking the best from different participants' suggestions.

Similar tasks can be found in almost any Business English text-book but what is called critical analysis tasks here are only those where business information to be analyzed and criticized is supplied not by the teacher or the author of teaching materials but by students themselves. It is they who make efforts to get this information from the store of their background knowledge, from what they have read, heard or imagined. So, the "share" of students' creative efforts in such tasks is much greater than in traditional ones. Critical analysis tasks can be most efficient, natural and suitable as an integral part of imaginative continuous simulation where everything depends on learners' imagination and creativity.

During continuous simulations students prepare a lot of their own materials such as papers for critical analysis tasks, drafts of meetings' decisions and proceedings, graphs, diagrams etc. They make the group's portfolio, and on the basis of it the final product of continuous simulations is produced. It may be a firm's detailed prospectus or its annual report etc. So, continuous simulations are very closely related to Project English (Hutchinson, 1994).

Advantages of the suggested approach may be summarized as follows. The first and the most important advantage that could be observed was the great motivational potential of the approach. Learners became very greatly motivated; their enthusiasm and interest were so great, discussions and debates often became so heated and life-like that one sometimes got an impression the firm invented and imagined by the students really existed and was functioning. So, quite a natural business activity setting had been created, and it certainly helped a lot in accelerating business communication skills and fluency development.

The second advantage was the fact that the learning process had become to be largely regulated and controlled by students themselves with the teacher turning into a facilitator (Rogers, 1983). Thus, learner-centering gets implemented with all its positive influence on the process of learning and its results.

Finally, to participate efficiently in imaginative continuous simulations and do critical analysis tasks, students, in preparing for classes, have to find (themselves or with the help of their teacher) quite a lot of supplementary materials, to read them, and to do quite a lot of writing in English. Therefore, an oral course becomes a source of parallel reading and writing skills development. All these advantages make the approach a good aid to teaching Business English in a non-English-speaking setting.

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